

Culture Watch

The Mighty Pen of New Phnom Penh

By **JANET WISCOMBE**, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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As the compact Cambodian literary giant sips an espresso at a cafe in Long Beach, he merrily expounds on subjects ranging from roller-blading and child rearing to political assassinations and sinister plots.

Don't be fooled by the soft eyes and the lovable smile. Here in New Phnom Penh, home to the largest number of Cambodians in the free world, he is variously venerated and despised.

"He is vicious," declares one leader in the Cambodian community who wishes to remain anonymous out of fear of igniting a word war. "People are scared of him."

"He is a great writer. He is building bridges in the community," offers Chenda Bourng, a businessman. "He is the most important Cambodian writer and political historian in the world."

Polin Soth ponders the mixed reviews. "People think I'm crazy," he says. "I think they are crazy. My only enemy is the corrupt personality."

Then he laughs--mischievously, wholeheartedly.

In January, Soth and Bourng began publishing a 52-page general interest weekly newspaper out of the rear of a copy and print shop in Long Beach, home to about 50,000 Cambodians. It is called Nokor Thom (Big Country) News, a name with special meaning to Cambodians throughout the world. Soth is the editor, and Bourng is the owner and publisher.

In July 1974, less than a year before the collapse of Cambodia, Soth was a well-known young writer and editor of Nokor Thom, then the largest daily in Phnom Penh. But as the country began hemorrhaging, his job became more and more perilous. At one point, he and his uncle narrowly escaped a death squad.

"I was an actor in a tragedy," he says.

On the day before Nokor Thom was permanently silenced, Soth had written an incendiary story, "Le Roi Est Nu" ("The Emperor Is Naked") sharply critical of the government. "It was like a bomb in the streets," he recalls.

By the time the edition was delivered to newsstands, he, his wife and the elder of his two sons were already at the airport. When police stormed the newsroom, the young family was in an airplane en route to Paris.

Many of his relatives--including his father and two brothers--didn't escape the killing fields. Still, Soth takes no comfort in the reported death last week of Pol Pot, the notorious leader of the Khmer Rouge responsible for the deaths of more than 1 million Cambodians.

"It was a hoax," he says. "Pol Pot is a good actor."

The body of the former guerrilla dictator, which was shown on televised reports worldwide, didn't even resemble Pol Pot, Soth says. "The body was too thick, the face was too round, the hair was too dark. The dark hair was a message to his followers that he's still alive. It was all choreographed."

With the rebirth of Nokor Thom, which Soth unsuccessfully tried to resurrect in 1987, there are now four Cambodian newspapers published in the Los Angeles area. Soth has been the primary writer for two of the longest surviving, Ankor Borei, which is published in Anaheim and concentrates on political issues in Cambodia, and Serey Pheap, a Signal Hill-based tabloid that focuses on social issues in the refugee community, and is noted for personal attacks and racy cartoons about community leaders and monks.

A few years ago while Soth was working at Serey Pheap, someone in the community apparently was so angered by his editorials that a fire was lighted in a fuel can in the grocery store below the newsroom. No one was injured. On another occasion, gunshots were fired into the front windows.

(That's why Bourng, a survivor of the killing fields, says his business cards read only Chenda B. and identify him as "National Account Executive" instead of publisher. It's not so much that he fears for his physical safety. Rather, he says, he prefers being "a hidden man" because he doesn't want to kindle any pen wars.)

"The political factions in Cambodia are mirrored in Long Beach," Soth says. "What hurts people is the truth--like Monica Lewinsky."

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At 52, Soth is a free spirit, an intellectual who studied at the Sorbonne, a writer and linguist who has published books in Cambodian and French, a father who's driven a cab and hawked French makeup to support

his family, a lover of motorcycles, roller-blading and baccarat, a philosopher who quotes Nietzsche and Kant, Sartre and Kierkegaard.

"Now I'm not so much of a lover of Nietzsche," he corrects with a thick accent. "I am not a rebel anymore. I prefer Kierkegaard. I am ambivalent like Kierkegaard."

Above all, he is a Cambodian novelist who has spent most of his adult life trying to figure out how his country convulsed into a killing field. Later this month, he'll send his new book, "The Apocalypse Road," to a publisher in Paris. Excerpts already have appeared in *Nokor Thom* in English, as translated by his son, Bora.

Still, he says the complexity of translation prevents him from publishing in English. Written in French, the new book is part memoir, part political analysis, "the story of a defeat, the one of my country inextricably linked to my own."

Soth, whose father and two brothers disappeared during the murderous reign of the Khmer Rouge, has been unrelentingly tormented by the tragedy of his country. He wrote the book as a way of discovering the truth about what caused the holocaust. Until the history is understood, he says, Cambodia can't begin to deal with its dysfunction.

"I have been haunted by my sin," he says. "I always blamed myself. All Cambodians are haunted by their sin. It was a collective genocide. Cambodians are ashamed of what happened. It is in their subconscious."

"Now I am relieved because I understand who started the war and what caused it. I have solved the puzzle. I realize it was not my sin. I know we were pawns. We were manipulated by our king [Prince Norodom Sihanouk]."

A big grin travels over his face. "I will send a copy of my book to Hun Sen, Prince Ranariddh and Prince Sihanouk," he says, referring to the country's main political characters. "Now I am happy. I am exorcised from my past."

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Soth is a man between cultures, an iconoclast who dwells on the fringes of American society and rarely ventures beyond his literary cocoon. He confesses he's quite alienated from American society, a fact that has more to do with money and time than interest or temperament. He has no clue where the new Getty Museum is, for example, but, when told about it, expresses genuine interest in visiting.

Today he is wearing a casual pullover, cotton pants and a pair of well-used Tony Lama cowboy boots. What gives the ensemble its decidedly offbeat look is the natty navy pinstriped jacket with the label "Brooks Brothers Two Button" still stitched to the forearm of the sleeve.

These days he bombs around town in a 1987 Cadillac and earns the princely sum of \$1,700 a month with the extra money he makes from a moonlighting job in radio. For several years, he's broadcast a news report in Cambodian for Radio-France International from the bedroom of the house he now rents with his mother in Cypress.

It's far more than he's accustomed to making since immigrating to Long Beach from Paris in 1982 as a single parent with two young boys. For most of his adult life, he's eked out a living as a journalist for bare-bones publications and hasn't been able to afford a car.

During the years he and his family lived in Paris, they had a very tough time. Even though he had lived in Europe when he was in his 20s, he was unprepared for the extreme difficulty of raising a family as an exile in Paris. There were few jobs and no social safety net. Referring to his 10-year marriage, he says, "We divorced because of poverty."

He and his two boys, now 24 and 27, moved to California to be closer to friends and relatives, including a brother who is a police officer in Long Beach. He speaks proudly of his sons, Bora, a fashion designer and Norith, an aspiring filmmaker who recently made a movie based on Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis."

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Ordinarily a cheerful, good-natured man, Soth's smile quickly fades when talk turns to the volatile political situation in Cambodia since Hun Sen's coup in July, and of the Cambodian refugees in the United States, a community he believes is unraveling because of corruption and welfare, broken families and broken hearts.

"There is no leadership in the community," he says. "People have lost faith. They don't trust leaders. They don't believe in themselves."

He is hopeful Nokor Thom will help restore some sense of identity and community. So far, the paper has been so well-received, there are plans to double its size in the near future and to begin printing an edition in Phnom Penh, where it is now hand-carried.

"So far it is really good," says Sovann Tith, executive director of

the United Cambodian Community Inc., a social service agency in Long Beach. "I appreciate having four Cambodian newspapers in Long Beach. It's good to have a lot of opinions."

The paper, with a circulation of 20,000, is written in the Khmer language with an editorial in English, a spattering of French and an occasional literary essay or memoir about Cambodia. General interest stories range from politics in Cambodia to more local matters such as a profile of a young man believed to be the first Cambodian immigrant in the U.S. to earn a degree in law.

Since the fatal shooting of actor Haing Ngor in Los Angeles two years ago, Soth has written stories raising questions about the murder. Despite the convictions last week of three gang members, he still maintains Haing Ngor's death was politically motivated. "His death may have been the settling of a score. He discredited the Khmer Rouge," Soth says. "But I don't dare write about it. I have no proof."

At Nokor Thom, the staff of four includes a writer who submits copy from France and a cartoonist from Australia. Like other Cambodian newspapers, Nokor Thom boldly displays political cartoons on its front pages, editorial opinion frequently depicting Cambodia's archrivals, Hun Sen and Prince Norodom Ranariddh, as power mongers and idiots. It is the kind of political commentary that is becoming more and more rare in Cambodia, a nation plagued by conspiracies, political murders and kidnappings.

"I am neutral," says Soth, an outspoken anti-royalist who manages to enrage readers from all sides of the highly volatile Cambodian political debate, and to titillate and shock members of the community with risqué novels.

Recently he's fallen in love with a woman who lives on the East Coast. The two plan to marry--maybe next year. But Polin Soth isn't an incorrigible romantic who dreams of matrimonial bliss. In fact, he insists his current happiness is far more related to the catharsis of unveiling political truths than to matters of the heart.

He paraphrases Kierkegaard, who once observed, "If you're married, you're miserable. If you're not, you're miserable."

"I am happy. I have peace of mind," he says. "I am more reasonable as I am aging. I don't expect much from my marriage life."

Then he laughs the lovable, ebullient laugh.

(SIDEBAR)Four Cambodian Papers to Pick From

In the Los Angeles area, there are four distinctly different Cambodian newspapers (all free) ranging from a tabloid that is mostly ads to a sophisticated political publication distributed internationally.

* Nokor Thom (Big Country) News, once the largest daily in Phnom Penh, is a Long Beach-based general interest weekly with a circulation of 20,000 that is written in Khmer with an editorial in English.

* Serey Pheap (Freedom) is a weekly Signal Hill-based tabloid written in Khmer that focuses on social issues affecting the local refugee community, and has a history of publishing sharp-tongued articles and lewd cartoons about local Cambodian leaders. Its circulation is 20,000.

* Angkor Borei (City of Angkor) News is an Anaheim-based paper published every 10 days that focuses on political news in Cambodia and is written in Khmer with commentary in English. It is distributed locally and to other communities with large populations of Cambodians--from Providence, R.I., to Paris. Its circulation is 8,000.

* The Phnom Penh News, a Long Beach-based weekly tabloid written in Khmer, has little editorial content and is largely ads. Its circulation is 10,000.

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